

## Going Around in Circles: Learning and Coaching with your Peers

Who has time for learning? People often wonder when they can find the time in their busy schedule to pause and reflect on what they have done, what's on their plate, and what's ahead in the bigger context of their job. Learning seems a distant priority when pressure is mounting to produce immediate results. Learning is often viewed as something you get out there, beyond your normal work life, when you occasionally need to fill up with expert knowledge. While this sounds like the learning we've grown accustomed to, the possibilities for integrating learning into our lives abound in our everyday work and personal experiences. The questions we face are:

- How can we tap into our own insights and that of others to be more effective at what we do?
- How can we take advantage of being in the midst of action to learn something new about ourselves, the people we work with, our organization, and the challenges we face together?
- How can we support the people around us in realizing their full potential?

Answers to these questions are not trivial and embodying learning in our every day actions is a lot harder than simply getting it intellectually. It requires that we pay attention to what we want to learn and that we practice the things we want to change.

What's different about this way of learning? *Coaching circles™* come from this vantage point. They start from the premise that adults learn better under certain conditions:

- When the cycle of action, reflection, and learning is embedded in their practice and focuses on their reality;
- When they are able to observe themselves in action and to have others feedback to them what they see;
- When they have the capacity to ask discriminating questions about their situation and can support others in thinking creatively about the dilemmas they are facing; and,
- When they can explore issues and vulnerabilities with their peers in a safe learning environment.

In this kind of environment, people hold the key to their learning and have the opportunity to harvest the collective intelligence and wisdom of their peers and colleagues.

*Coaching circles* help people make sense of the dilemmas, challenges or issues they face in their jobs and explore effective actions to resolve them. They also help them gain first hand experience in coaching their peers in ways that open new possibilities for action, reflection and learning. *Coaching circles* work on the basis of collaborative inquiry. In this context, asking insightful questions and reflecting on the possibilities they create are considered to be more valuable and to have more impact than providing expert knowledge or specific answers to problems.

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How do *coaching circles* work? Typical *coaching circles* are composed of six participants who meet for one day every four to six weeks. In addition, an experienced coach helps the group to master the process and build their learning and coaching competence. During group sessions, each participant gets “air time” to address the project he/she brings to the group. As the client, he/she briefly outlines what he/she has done and the most pressing issues or dilemmas he/she is facing. In response to the client’s specific request, group members ask questions that help to shed new light on the issues and to explore new possibilities for action. They avoid providing advice or getting into a problem solving mode. Near the end of the time period, the client reflects on what was heard, which questions were helpful and what actions he/she intends to take. Other participants also reflect on what they learned from the exchange. The group takes a few minutes to share its insights/observations before moving on to the next “air time”.

Over a complete day and over several months, peer coaching circles provide a unique opportunity for people to observe themselves and to observe others in action. Each time the group connects, engages in a dialogue and works together within defined airtimes, windows into the each other’s world potentially open up. The way people speak, ask questions, and offer feedback or the recurring breakdowns they encounter within their respective projects tell us a lot about them and the way they are in the world.

The insights gained by participants and facilitators throughout the life of an action-learning group are invaluable because they raise the quality and relevance of the inquiry, the reflection process and the resulting actions. During the life of a group, as coaching skills and trust grow, different themes or topics (e.g. listening, mood, commitments, assumptions) can be embedded in the action-learning process to deepen self-knowledge and learning.

One of the key contributions of the facilitator/coach is to regularly introduce powerful new distinctions to the group that will bring about new ways of observing, assessing and behaving within the group and back on the job. The “distinction” or theme is typically introduced at the beginning of the day. A related question is then used during the airtime reflection and feedback period. The final debriefing period of the session enables participants to synthesize their learning on this topic and think about how they will apply these on the job.

What makes this way of learning so powerful? This way of working together over time provides people with a wide range of opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills and performance. Let’s look at how participants can use what they learn through *coaching circles* to be better coaches in their job.

1. **Participants learn to reflect** – This means first and foremost that they learn to stop, i.e. to break away, if only momentarily, from the treadmill of immediate transactions. Reflecting on one’s experiences makes learning explicit. In *coaching circles*, participants practice paying attention to the

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process they are engaged in, to what they are learning and to what's going on with them and the people in the group. They learn to respect silence and stillness as a means for action rather than to view it as time wasted.

2. **Participants learn to uphold their commitments** – In *coaching circles*, participants make commitments about the actions they intend to take to advance their project or address their challenge. These commitments extend both to their peers and their boss. They recognize that making their intentions public is an important aspect of holding themselves accountable for their learning. They also recognize that competence can only be enhanced through practice in the real world.
3. **Participants learn to stand in other peoples' shoes** – In order to attend to their peers' needs and to be of service to them, participants learn to detect underlying beliefs and assumptions and understand the way others are in the world. They learn to pay attention to the language their peers use and the actions they take in order to access their world and to help them gain new perspectives from which to see their problems or challenges. The questions participants raise challenge their assumptions and push them to consider new possibilities for action. Through this process, participants uncover important clues in relation to their own learning and development.
4. **Participants learn about how their organization works** – *Coaching circles* bring together people from very different parts of the organization. Their exposure to other peoples' projects and dilemmas raises their awareness of the organization, how decisions are made, the culture they are embedded in and the opportunities that exist for advancing their own agenda. They also realize in short order that the issues they face are similar to those faced by their peers. Understanding the context within which people take actions and the relationships that support them is an important dimension of coaching others.
5. **Participants learn to think out of the box** – The questions raised by peers often have the effect of shedding a whole new light on one's problem. Creativity comes from people opening up new ways of seeing a dilemma through powerful questions, e.g. What makes you think this is not going to work? What would happen if...? It also comes from the ability to process questions into actions that were not apparent before. Coaching involves evoking new possibilities for someone else so that they can make sense of them in their world. As creative as it may be, "throwing a solution over the wall" may do little to build the other person's ability to be creative over the long term.

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6. **Participants learn about themselves** – *Coaching circles* provide a safe ground from which to explore one's strengths and weaknesses and to admit, "I don't know". Humility is a great asset for learning and participants have ample opportunity to practice this with their trusted peers. Learning about oneself also means paying attention to one's mood, feelings, somatic responses and what triggers them. It means being able to detach oneself from the action and to observe objectively what has gone on, e.g. What did I notice in this situation? How did I decide what to do? Gaining access into one's inner world is an essential step to coaching others with compassion and respect.
7. **Participants learn how to learn** – *Coaching circles* are more than people helping each other solve problems. They are about learning new behaviors that enable participants to notice and take corrective measures when their actions are not aligned with their intentions. They are also about becoming more competent at learning on a self-generating basis. *Coaching circles* are practice fields that help participants make increasingly clearer distinctions about learning that they can use in their work and personal lives.
8. **Participants learn how to listen** – Listening is often considered one of those skills that are easy to measure, i.e. the absence of speaking. In reality, listening is much more than that. In coaching circles, people develop their ability to suspend judgment so that they can listen fully to what others are saying. Listening requires patience, the ability to hold the other person with our full attention; the ability to hold the silence long enough for the other person to process what may have just happened. Participants learn to listen in ways that generate possibilities for reflection and action. Their challenge is to integrate this skill in how they manage the web of relationships they must count on to meet their commitments.
9. **Participants learn to give and receive feedback** – In *coaching circles*, participants constantly practice their ability to observe others and to make assessments about their situations. They use these skills to ask good questions and to provide feedback during the guided debriefing periods scheduled after each airtime and at the end of each day. Debriefings are a common tool for people to review and learn from their actions. Giving honest and precise feedback from a perspective of support and respect (and getting feedback) is probably one of the most potent actions people can take to develop themselves and those around them.
10. **Participants learn to ask good questions** – Asking questions is core to *coaching circles*. It's the glue that holds the process together. In an era when knowledge is created at an exponential rate and people are constantly asked to do more with less, the art of asking questions, if not a survival

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skill, is a key leadership skill. Questions help people in their reflection, challenge their beliefs and assumptions, and stimulate new ways of apprehending action. Questions empower others to make their own decisions and to learn while doing so. Telling others what to do is often a short-term fix. As team members and coaches, you need to decide which hat to wear to achieve results in the short and long term.

Moving forward with *coaching circles* *Coaching circles* are but one innovative way for people to learn to be more effective at what they do. They provide a rhythm of action, reflection and learning that supports their development in real time and over an extended period. Most *coaching circles* (a variation also known as action learning groups) work together with a coach or facilitator for an initial period of time (e.g. 6-8 months) in order to ground their practice. Once they reach a high level of performance and become self-correcting, they are able to self-manage.

*Coaching circles* help people pay attention to their long-term performance and foster the development of competencies where they count, on the job and in peoples' own lives. Even if peer coaching circles are not for you, think of how you can apply some of the lessons from this article in your world.

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Charles regularly leads workshops on topics related to executive learning, development and coaching and has published a number of articles and book chapters in these areas, most recently in "The Future of Executive Development", published by Executive Development Associates (2004), "Leading Organizational Learning" published under the auspices of the Leader to Leader Institute (2004) and in "Action Learning Worldwide", published under the auspices of the Global Executive Learning Network (2002). Charles holds a Master's degree in Economic Geography from the University of Ottawa and has received extensive professional education in the field of adult learning and coaching, namely as a graduate of the Professional Coaching Course from New Ventures West of San Francisco.

Charles' recent clients include a wide range of departments and agencies from the Government of Canada and business clients around the world in the manufacturing, resources, financial, telecommunications and pharmaceuticals sectors.

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